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Acts of God

Acts of God: Responses to Disasters in Early Modern Europe

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As the tsunami of Boxing Day 2004 will have reminded us all, man is always at the mercy of the natural environment. This was never more the case than in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Europe experienced the climax of the so-called 'Little Ice Age', the coldest period since the end of the Ice Age. The result was accelerated glaciation, ferocious winters, wet summers and increased flooding across many parts of the continent. That this coincided with a period of severe religious tension in the wake of the Protestant Reformation provides the historian with a chance to explore aspects of early-modern piety, the natural environment, and the interaction between the two in early-modern Europe. Until now, Reformation history and environmental history have tended to be two discrete fields of study. Environmental historians have, in general, focused on recreating what the environment was like in the past, while Reformation historians have barely considered the impact that the natural world might have had on the people whose religious lives they study. This project will knit the two together, and will, it is anticipated, result in a comparative study covering cases from the three major confessions (Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic) and taken from across Europe.

I intend to start this potentially vast project with a case-study of one city: Lucerne in Switzerland. The inhabitants of the Alpine city of Luzern, situated 434 m above sea-level, witnessed the impact of the Little Ice Age more closely than most. As the glaciers advanced, winters became palpably colder while periods of thaw saw an increased risk of flooding. The environment had, however, a further surprise in store: the night of 18 September 1601 saw central Switzerland rocked by an earthquake which resulted in the phenomenon of a tsunami on the river Reuss as it flowed through the heart of Luzern. Eight lives were lost and numerous buildings damaged in an inundation of flood water that was over 4 m high in places. While such events were taking place, the civic and religious authorities of Luzern were also battling to keep their city free from the Protestant heresy that surrounded them. By the dawn of the seventeenth century they had been largely successful in this, with Luzern acting as a dominant force in the Swiss 'Golden Alliance' against Protestantism. Even so, hearts and minds had still to be fully won, and from 1574 Luzern was the base for a vigorous Jesuit mission that sought to reinvigorate Catholic devotion in this unsettled environment.

The proposed study of Luzern in this period will, in itself, act as an important first case study of early-modern disaster-response and early-modern perceptions of and interactions with the natural environment. It will also make a valuable and original contribution to existing discourse in another major historiographical field: that of Reformation history. The Catholic and the Protestant churches alike were extremely anxious to exert control over the populace in this period of immense religious change, and seasonal change and natural disasters alike gave both confessions the perfect opportunity to re-assert their claims. Much remains to be said on how the Catholic church in particular responded to changes in the natural environment in the same period. Catholic liturgy from the period indicates that the annual rhythm of church-dominated ritual acted as a powerful marker of the changing seasons for the local community, while appeals for the intercession of the saints, fasting, processions and acts of penance were all common responses to natural disaster. What little is known so far on Luzern suggests that the Catholic authorities in the Swiss city acted in just such a way: the flood of 1601 was the occasion of a ban of dancing, to signal the need for communal sobriety in the face of God's might, while the bridge over the river Reuss was decorated with religious iconography and texts, in a bid to reassert the Catholic identity of the city and the power of the Church (literally) over nature. Thus the proposed study of Luzern will also contribute to existing work on the nature of Catholic reform in an urban environment.

Lamentable newes out of Monmouthshire in VVales Contayning, the wonderfull and most fearefull accidents of the great ouerflowing of waters in the saide countye, drowning infinite numbers of cattell of all kinds, as sheepe, oxen, kine and horses, with others: together with the losse of many men, women and children, and the subuersion of xxvi parishes in Ianuary last 1607., London.

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